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# The Art of Presence

ASEF BAYAT

The Middle East is currently saturated with talk about “change.” Yet, the resiliency of authoritarianism and patriarchy in the region coupled with the evident failure of “democratization”-by-conquest have plunged this part of the world into a depressing impasse. The region’s Muslim majority is caught up between, on the one hand, authoritarian regimes or fundamentalist inspired opposition, both of which tend to impose severe social control in the name of nation and religion, and on the other, flagrant foreign intervention and occupation in the name of democratization. We witness, then, a clear abuse of faith, freedom, and the faithful. In the midst of this, however, one thing has become clearer. If a meaningful change is to occur in these societies it should come from within, through the self-assertion of societal forces in a democratic direction. But the monumental question is how?

What options do ordinary citizens have when faced, in political, economic or cultural domains, with constraining forces and institutions? Some might choose complicity or “loyalty” by joining the mainstream currents. Others, while not approving of the existing arrangements, may well disengage, surrendering their rights to voice concerns and thereby exiting the political stage altogether in the hope that things will somehow change someday. Then again, others may choose to express their contention loudly and clearly even if it means remaining on the margins of society: to be vocal but marginal, or, even worse, irrelevant. It is, however, extremely challenging to be heavily *present* at the heart of society, to struggle for liberation, and yet maintain one’s integrity; to be effective but also principled. More precisely, I am referring to that delicate *art of presence* in harsh circumstance, the ability to create social space within which those individuals who refuse to exit, can advance the cause of human rights, equality and justice, and do so under formidable political conditions. It is this difficult strategy, demanding sharp vision, veracity, and above all endurance and energy, that holds the most promise. Meaningful change in the Muslim Middle East may well benefit from such a protracted strategy.

The public life and activism of the Iranian lawyer and Noble Peace Prize Laureate, Shirin Ebadi, symbolizes that art of persistent presence. She gives testimony to, and exemplifies, the profound desire of millions of women in Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world for a meaningful social presence. She became the first Muslim woman judge in Iran and held the presidency of the city court of Tehran until the Islamic Revolution, when she was forced to resign on the grounds that women could not be judges in Islam. Yet she, along with a host of women activists (religious and non-religious) refused to remain silent; they waged a relentless campaign by writing, reasoning, reinterpreting the Islamic texts, engaging in public debate and lobbying to reverse that unjust ruling until women were once more able to serve as judges under the Islamic Republic. But such a struggle, this double strategy of no-silence and no-violence, could not have gone very far without the general societal support for change. The idea of Muslim female judges, only one instance of the struggles taking place for gender equality in Islam, had already gained a great deal of public legitimacy through grassroots campaigns of rights activists such as Ebadi, Mehranguiz Kar, Shahla Sherkat, and many other women and men. Its appeal was further rooted in the yearning of Iranian women, in general, to assert their public presence in society, not necessarily by undertaking extra-ordinary activities, but through practices of everyday life such as working outside the home, pursuing higher education, engaging in sports activities, performing art and music, travelling, or executing banking transactions in place of their husbands. And these

very ordinary practices, once normalized among the general public, were to undermine gender hierarchy in their society while imposing their logic on the political, legal and economic institutions of the state.

Understandably, reform of authoritarian states would require distinct arduous strategies. Nevertheless, societal change remains indispensable if a meaningful democratic reform of the state is to be sustained. Change in a society’s sensibilities is the precondition for far-reaching democratic transformation. While social change occurs, partly as the unintended outcome of structural processes such as migration, urbanization, demographic shifts, or the rise in literacy, it is also partly the result of global factors and flows, as well as the effect of the exchange of ideas, information, and models. But the most crucial element for democratic reform is an active citizenship, a sustained presence of individuals, groups and movements in every available social space, whether institutional or informal, in which it asserts its rights and fulfils its responsibilities. For it is precisely in such spaces that alternative discourses, practices and politics are produced.

I envision a strategy whereby every social group generates change in society through active citizenship in all immediate domains: children at home and schools, students in colleges, teachers in the classrooms, workers in shop floors, athletes in stadiums, artists through their mediums, intellectuals in media, and women at home and in public domains. This means that not only are they to voice their claims, broadcast violations done unto them, and make themselves heard, but also take the responsibility of excelling in what they do. An authoritarian regime should not be a reason for not producing excellent novels, brilliant handicrafts, math champions, world class athletes, dedicated teachers, or a global film industry. Excellence is power; it is identity. By art of presence, I imagine the way in which a society, through the practices of daily life, may regenerate itself by affirming the values that deject the authoritarian personality, get ahead of its elites, and become capable of enforcing its collective sensibilities on the state and its henchmen. And in this, the role of women in challenging gender hierarchy in and outside home is indispensable.

By art of presence, active citizenry, I do not necessarily mean pervasive social movements or collective mobilization for political transformation, although such imagined citizenry is likely to welcome large-scale collective action. For authoritarian rule not only impedes contentious actions, but it is unrealistic to expect society to be in a constant state of vigour, vitality, and collective struggles. Society, with its ordinary people, also gets tired, demoralized, and even repressed. Activism, the *extra-ordinary* practices to produce social change, is the stuff of activists, who may energize collective sentiments when the opportunity allows. The point is not to reiterate the political significance of contentious movements, nor to stress on the necessity of undercutting the coercive power of the states. The point rather is to stress how lay citizens, with their ordinary practices of everyday life, through the art of presence or active citizenry, may recondition the established political elites and refashion state institutions into their habitat.

There is of course a role for outsiders to play. Instead of interfering, they can offer courage and solidarity by recognizing those who persist in the need for change through their active presence. Recognition energizes contenders and diminishes their despair in harsh political circumstance. The acknowledgment of Shirin Ebadi serves as a fine example.

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